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FM AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9882

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000616

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

EUR/CE FOR ASCHEIBE, EUR/OHI FOR CKENNEDY

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ROMANIA'S JEWS: DYING OFF, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) As the Government of Romania prepares to inaugurate the Bucharest Holocaust Memorial October 8, Romania's Jewish community finds itself in a paradox. Anti-Semitism - though still prevalent and in some ways ingrained in Romanian society - has lost much of its virulence and overtness. At the same time, the small and aging Jewish community is dying out with diminishing hope for renewal. Cultural life for Jews is becoming sufficiently barren that the chief rabbi in Bucharest, a young father of two, may emigrate. End Summary.

MEMORIALIZATION AND REMEMBRANCE...

¶2. (U) Construction of the Bucharest Holocaust memorial is on track after numerous bureaucratic delays. Dedication of the concrete plaza and structure in a small downtown park is scheduled for October 8, with President Basescu and high-level government officials expected to attend. The event will undoubtedly receive wide coverage and contribute to Holocaust awareness. Although Holocaust denial in Romania is limited to right-wing extremists, only in the late 1990's did the country's education curriculum acknowledge Romania's unique role as the only country besides Germany to implement its own system of concentration camps. (Note: Authorities deported approximately 150,000 Jews to Romanian-controlled camps in the Transnistria region of present-day Moldova, where 80,000-90,000 died. An additional 55,000 Jews were killed in mass pogroms in Romania. End note). Today awareness is on the rise; high schools offer an optional course on the Holocaust, and an Embassy contact in Bacau county administers a nation-wide teacher training program for Holocaust studies.

...AND CONTEMPORARY SUFFERING

¶3. (U) Ironically, while more Romanians become more aware of Jewish history, the 6,000 strong Jewish community in Romania is suffering through a difficult period. The Jewish Federation of Romania, the primary source of social assistance for elderly Jews, has cut back programming. Until recently, the Federation received almost all of its assistance funds from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, known as "The Joint"). The JDC cut its funding by two-thirds as part of a plan in which the Federation would sell some real estate holdings to make up the difference. However, the decline of real estate values during the economic crisis led to a severe funding shortfall, forcing the Federation to raise the minimum age for elderly Jews to qualify for aid. The result: an increase in the number of pensioners 60-plus years old in need of medical and social assistance, yet too young to qualify for it.

¶4. (SBU) The slow pace of Jewish property restitution makes matters worse. The executive director of Caritatea, the Jewish foundation that files claims with the Romanian

Restitution Agency (ANRP) to recoup confiscated properties, told us that outstanding claims have inhibited sales and other transfers of Jewish-owned properties, preventing much-needed access to cash. While the ANRP appears no slower in processing Jewish claims than those of the general population -- it has resolved about 300 of the approximately 2,000 claims filed by Caritatea -- the process has not always worked as it should. For example, in the northeastern city of Iasi, local authorities assigned hundreds of acres that used to belong to the local Jewish community, including part of a cemetery, to other petitioners as replacement for their non-returnable properties. Such swaps are permissible under Romanian law, but in this case the authorities did not take into account that the Jewish community had active claims on the same plot of land. The dispute now sits in court.

¶15. (SBU) Another concern is an aging leadership unwilling or unable to groom a younger generation of leaders. In separate conversations, the president of the Committee to Monitor Anti-Semitism and Bucharest's chief rabbi explained the generation gap as resulting from different historical experiences. Romania's older Jews suffered through a Fascist regime, the Holocaust, 40 years of communism and a tumultuous transition to capitalism. For them, Romania's younger, more urbane Jews -- some of whom came of age in a relatively prosperous, free Israel - have not paid their historical dues. In other communities, however, there is no identifiable younger generation. Septuagenarian Jewish leaders in Bacau County said the small community there overwhelmingly consisted of individuals 60 or older.

¶16. (SBU) Back in Bucharest, home to half of Romania's Jews, cultural life suffers. In recent years attendance at religious and secular events has sharply declined, especially

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among the youth, the Bucharest rabbi said. He fears that the bonds of community will weaken further when the current crop of leaders dies off. Only 30 years old and the father of two, the rabbi surmised he may emigrate to offer his children a chance to grow up within a community, lest Romania be left with only empty buildings and memories.

¶17. (SBU) Comment. Ironically, even as Romanians are slowly coming to grips with the Holocaust and the insipid anti-Semitism that continues to plague their country, the shrinking Jewish population here may be reaching the point of no return. By the time Judaism is finally able to enjoy a tolerant and accepting environment in Romania, there may be few Jews left to benefit from it. End comment.
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